

RON'S AT HOME ON DEFENSE



Stewart Verifies Coach Reay's Faith In Him and Blossoms Into Stardom at Old Position

By MARGARET SCOTT

TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS found the 1957-58 season far from gratifying but there was one development, at least, that could be classed as noteworthy. That was the tremendous play of Ron Stewart, who shifted back to defense and turned out to be the best rearguard the Leafs had all season.

You'd have been looked at with suspicion six months ago if you'd had the audacity to class Stewart with Doug Harvey, Montreal's perennial All-Star defenseman. But right now, "Stew" has earned the respect of all opponents and can be classed among the Kellys, Flamans, Gadsbys and perhaps Harveys.

Aside from the fact that Stewart has made remarkable progress in his short term on defense, there's nothing fantastic about comparing him to the illustrious Harvey, since he definitely possesses similar traits. For instance, Harvey is credited with being the main force behind the Habs, though at times he appears lethargic and indifferent on the ice. He doesn't make a habit of playing the man, and some of his forays, which result in goals, start off as innocent looking journeys. Yet he's the general of the ice brigade and a veritable brick wall in front of Plante.

Much of that applies to Stewart. Coach Reay has frequently stated: "As Stewart goes so go the Leafs," and sure enough, when Ron is enjoying a good night the club is usually flying. He's not a belligerent hitter, sometimes he appears so preoccupied you think he's trying to spot a few friends up in the greens, but he has a mean shot from the point and has accumulated a fair number of points. Defensively, he frustrates the opposition and must surely be the greatest protection Ed Chadwick has seen since they invented knee pads.

How does Stewart feel about all this? Being basically a lover of hockey he'll play any position just as long as they'll let him on the ice, but he definitely has a soft spot for defense. He's a player who thrives upon regular work and prefers lengthier ice time to the frequent rests sometimes given forward lines. The added responsibility of be-

ing touted as the team's leader has not brought a stoop to his broad shoulders nor robbed him of his full measure of sleep. He's happy over his success, but is not discussing All-Star laurels until he sees his name in the record book.

Since hockey players are a pretty retiring group when it comes to talking about their ice prowess, we bypassed Ron for this interview and approached two of his most ardent feminine supporters, his pretty wife, Barbara, and his sister, May, whose official title is Mrs. Michael Stroick of Calgary. Said Mrs. Stewart: "I'm afraid Ron doesn't talk much about himself, sometimes he even clams up with me. At one time I used to want to talk about the games and was always ready to discuss mistakes and make suggestions. Suddenly I realized that Ron didn't want to come home to that. The boys always hash things over among themselves, and if they've lost the game, the coach has a few things to say. By the time

they get home they want to forget about it. Home is their haven, the one place where they can relax, so I just sit back and form opinions from the few things Ron has to say."

The Stewarts own a house in Barrie, Ontario where they spend the summer months, but are wintering in the Leaside home of the Harry Watsons, who are living in Buffalo while Harry masterminds the Bisons. A dark-haired beauty, Mrs. Stewart is the former Barbara Christie of Barrie and married Ron in her home town on May 2, 1952. The couple now have two sons, Jeffrey and Terry, and are expecting an addition to the family momentarily. That's where Ron's sister enters the picture. She came hurrying east from Calgary to handle the Stewart household while Barbara is in hospital. "It's a combined business and pleasure trip," she laughed. "I'll look after the kids and get a chance to see a few hockey games. We get the games at home,



COACH BILLY REAY, shown here with Ron, had faith in Stewart as defenseman.

of course, the radio broadcasts start at 6:30 and at 7:30 we can watch it on TV, but we don't see as much of the Maple Leafs now that they are alternating with the Canadiens."

No one needs to ask Ron's sister if she's proud of her big league brother, you can tell that by the tone of her voice and her happy chuckle when she harkens back to their childhood days. "I'm a few years older than Ron," she explained, "and being the only kids in the family we were pretty close. I used to pride myself upon being a fair skater and when Ron was just four and a half Dad suggested that I teach him how to skate. I took him to the local rink, laced on his skates and was about to show him the fundamentals when he took off like a streak and started to glide all over the ice. I just stood there amazed. You can imagine how I felt when I went home and told Dad he didn't need any lessons."

With rare exceptions, it appears that hockey players are formed when they're barely out of the cradle, and that definitely applies to Ron Stewart. At the tender age of five he announced his intention of being a hockeyist and at fifteen he was on his way to Toronto to fulfill that statement. "It's small wonder Ron fell under the spell of hockey," stated his sister. "The whole city of Calgary is crazy about the game and in those days almost everyone followed the amateur teams. Ron wasn't satisfied with just one idol, he admired the entire Bentley family, and I think that stemmed from their connection with the Drumheller Miners. When Ron was just a little fellow he got a replica of the Drumheller uniform and from then on you couldn't shatter his faith in the Bentleys."

When Ron arrived in Toronto to play for the Marlboros he was taken into the home of Mr. and Mrs. Buck Houle, who are well known in the Maple Leaf organization. Being accepted in their household lessened his homesickness, though there were many occasions when he longed for the familiar sights of Calgary. After a short time in the Queen City he became a much travelled and traded junior, taking up residence in Windsor, Barrie and Guelph before joining the Leafs.

It was during his stint in Barrie that he met Barbara and to this day they are still wrangling over how they met. Barbara insists it was on a bus, while Ron claims it was at the home of mutual friends. Luckily for Ron, he didn't have to instruct his spouse on the rules of hockey, she knew the game inside out by the time she reached kindergarten. Her Dad helped form the junior OHA and was one of the founders of the Barrie Flyers, assisting in the campaign to erect the Barrie rink and helping to assemble a strong team. He no longer has an active connection with the club and expends his energy as a fan.

Though much has been written about Ron's waistline, his wife firmly declares he is only an average eater and maintains that his weight has not changed greatly over the years. "For a big man I think Ron eats sur-

prisingly little," stated Barbara. "He's a six footer, but he doesn't seem to need too much to keep him going. Actually, he's strictly a meat eater, because he hates all vegetables, especially potatoes. Both of us like pastry, but I don't think we indulge to excess."

Ron spends the months between May and September as a salesman for Labatts in the Barrie district. His main recreation in the off season is baseball and golf. With a busy hockey schedule and a couple of healthy youngsters, the Stewarts haven't much time for entertaining during the winter. They like TV, especially Robert Cummings and Red Skelton, have a passion for western music and are spasmodic readers. "Don't get the idea that we miss out on the social side of life," smiled Barbara, "because I think we do very well. I belong to a bridge group which meets every second week, I have a lot of friends whom I can phone regularly and I never miss a hockey game. I know for sure I'm going to get out for those 35 games and I meet a lot of friends at the Gardens."

When Ron began playing hockey out

west his sister started keeping a scrapbook on his progress and as the years rolled on the book expanded into two thick volumes. "I didn't dream there would be so many clippings," stated May. "At first I only saved the write-ups from the western papers, but when Ron joined the Maple Leafs I arranged to buy Toronto papers. Occasionally I get clippings from other NHL cities and they have enabled me to compile a wonderful souvenir. Ron would like the books now, but I'm not ready to hand them over."

When coach Reay converted Ron to defense he little realized he was satisfying more than his own desire. Out west the Stewart family had been thinking about the days when Ron gained accolades for his defensive ability and were hoping he would end up behind the blueline. "We're all very proud of Ron," admitted his sister. "He doesn't need to win any awards to have our support, but if he does gain a place on an All-Star team we'll regard that as a great honor, particularly so because he's literally a dark horse in a group of outstanding defensemen."

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